

PACKAGING WITH A COMMUNITY CONSCIENCE



Working for a plastic packaging manufacturer isn't always something people want to shout about at parties, especially if they are a passionate advocate of environmental projects in their local community. But for Danielle Cycak, Supply Chain Manager at RETAL, being on the inside is the perfect way to make a real difference. We cannot get away from the fact that plastic packaging is not having a golden time at the moment. It's an easy bogeyman across the media, from wildlife programmes to EU legislation, so it can be hard to be a plastic packaging champion without looking like you're disconnected from the zeitgeist. And of course, we all want to be responsible citizens and leave the world a better place than how we found it, so it's not like packaging professionals want to waste loads of valuable raw materials and just dispose of them in the nearest river.

Yet with plastic packaging being so easy to criticise, it also means that the reality of plastic as a packaging material is also incredibly transparent; both literally (consumer studies show a slow uptake for 'non glass like' packaging with higher recycled content, even though it's more sustainable) and metaphorically (being under the spotlight means there's nowhere to hide).

For Danielle Cycak, Supply Chain Manager for global plastic packaging manufacturer RETAL at its Donora, Pennsylvania plant, her dedication to actively supporting and participating in community-based environmental activities predates her employment with this leading company. Integrating her strong sense of responsibility towards environmental projects and her career development was a crucial aspect in her taking the job in the first place. Cycak tells Sustainable Plastics, "I've been a part of a number of community projects for years; we're so lucky to have an abundance of natural resources to explore from waterways to state parks as well as Pennsylvania being rooted in agriculture."

Danielle's activities incorporate her love of the outdoors as a Master Gardener volunteer, from organising family treasure hunts in local community gardens to personally raising over 100 butterflies every year (she chairs the 'Monarch Migration Project') and is a former beekeeper. She says, "The volunteer program has been rewarding so I am training to become a Master Watershed Steward, which means I can expand my focus on voluntary outreach programmes that support local waterways. This 17-week training course is providing me the tools to understand the importance of clean up and restoration activities in our community and how climate change is impacting on the natural habitat of our waterways. I volunteer a large percentage of my free time to local community projects, over 120 hours a year. Basically, I work, I volunteer, and I don't watch any TV!"

When Danielle joined RETAL as Supply Chain Manager in 2017, she realised that her unique position as a cheerleader for local environmental projects would be a distinct advantage – as long as she had the support of her employer. Having previously been employed in the oil and auto industries for over a decade, her relevant professional experience was clear, and well balanced with her can-do attitude. She explains, “I wanted to work for a global company and it can be hard to find employment locally that totally ticks every box. When I met with the team here at RETAL PA when I was called for interview I could tell that they were open minded, progressive, and keen to talk about how my community experience could be supported. I saw an opportunity to balance plastic and sustainability.”

That opportunity is coming to fruition and is clearly a long-term project that both Danielle and the RETAL team are pleased to be involved with. With RETAL PA being the latest of 19 global plastic packaging factories owned by RETAL, and currently its only US site, the company is steadfastly focused on its CSR activities, with a dedicated Sustainability Director who has overseen its progression to a B grade from the Carbon Disclosure Project, implemented sustainable procurement practices, and achieved a reduced of greenhouse gas emissions by 17%.

Love local

Thanks to Danielle’s work to have a better understanding of Donora and its wider community, her involvement and explanation of new team projects for 2021 include adopting the roadway outside the factory and keeping it clear from rubbish, arranging and participating in seasonal clean ups of the nearby waterways, and getting local people and other RETAL employees engaged in all she does. She says, “I love my local environment and I love being outdoors – it’s so important that we stay connected to our wildlife, our community spaces. Being able to talk to my colleagues about what I do outside of work, and to bring those activities in to work, makes me happy. That holistic approach is crucial and it’s a nice offset to the negatively around plastic packaging. I’m proud to say that I work for a plastic packaging company that is open to doing things differently; the team here at RETAL PA and the global management team has been really keen to hear about what I’m doing and to be a part of it.”

Danielle’s next goal is to promote recycling education in her local community, which doesn’t currently have a clear programme, with the support of RETAL in place. She says, “I’m always looking to have the conversation about how we can do more, how we can see what is needed and how we can help to make it happen. We’re on the right path for the circular economy in our own factory and I want to push that into the community; we’re talking about how RETAL can support that on a local level. I often kayak out on our waterways and you see how much plastic is thrown away; not just packaging, just everything thrown into the water. That’s why I am involved in clean ups and I want to encourage efficient and effective recycling so that the value of the discarded plastic is properly realised. And volunteering makes you feel good...volunteering is awesome!”